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ABSTRACT

The role of parental support in the development of a woman's sense of competence was examined and compared to earlier research. Hennig's study of women executives in 1970 found that a woman's supportive relationship with her father was a key factor in her development of competence. The present study was conducted to examine whether this finding would hold true today or whether the woman's relationship with her mother would be as important as the relationship with her father in terms of competence development. Women executives (N=118) completed questionnaires designed to address the problem of the development of competence in women's lives. The roles of their mother and father in contributing to their sense of competence, influencing their development, contributing to their motivation for success, and supporting their career goals were assessed over three developmental periods (early childhood, adolescence, and college and/or early career). The results suggest that, for these women executives, their mothers were equally, if not more, influential and supportive of their development of competence than were their fathers. (NB)

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RELATIONSHIPS, MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS, FATHERS & DAUGHTERS: A KEY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCE?

Presented at the Southeastern Psychological Association 39th Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, March 1993.

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According to Young-Eisendrath & Wiedeman (1987), the definition of competence can be thought of as having a vital link between one's life and circumstances. The authors suggested that the feeling of having control over one's life by being able to take effective action is necessary for the development of competence. The problem for many women has been that for most of their lives, either they have not been rewarded for the kinds of achievement endeavors that lead to feelings of competence, or they have, at best, received mixed messages about these types of endeavors.

In a study of women executives, Hennig (1970) found that a woman's supportive relationship with her father was a key factor in her development of competence. For the women in Hennig's study, their fathers had the same kind of achievement aspirations for them that they would have had if they had been sons and not daughters. Would a study of women executives today find that a woman's relationship with her father was still of uppermost importance in the development of competence? Or, perhaps, would we find that the relationship with their mothers was, at least, of equal importance? Has twenty years made a difference? Is the most significant relationship in a young woman's development of competence the one with her mother or the one with her father? And, in addition, how might feelings of competence be related to a woman's career goals (Freeman 1990; Grossman & Chester, 1990)?

METHOD

The subjects were 118 women executives. Each received a copy of a questionnaire designed to address the problem of the development of competence in women's lives. Included in the questionnaire was a 16-item subscale of the Sex-Role Questionnaire (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman & Broverman, 1968), adapted by Baruch (1976), to assess competence.

As part of the questionnaire, subjects were asked to respond to questions regarding whether they felt that their father or mother: 1. contributed more to their sense of competence; 2. was more influential to their development, in general; 3. contributed more to their motivation for success; and 4. most supported their career goals. These were assessed over three different developmental periods: early childhood, adolescence, and college and/or early career. Frequencies and percentages were obtained.

In addition, there was a section provided for subject's written comments about the persons, and/or other factors that they felt contributed to their development of competence. These comments, some of which are included in the discussion section of this paper, were analyzed qualitatively.

RESULTS

The four categories (sense of competence, most influential, motivation for success, and support of career goals) as stated in the method section, were compared across the three time periods (early childhood, adolescence, and college and/or early career). The results showed that in each of the three time periods, the women perceived that their mothers contributed more than their fathers in each of the four categories listed. The only exception being the two categories, development of competence and motivation for success, both during the adolescent period. For both development of competence and motivation for success during the adolescence period, fathers received higher percentages than mothers (see Table 1, p.10).

The sixteen-item competence subscale of the Sex-Role Inventory (Rosenkranz, et al., 1968), adapted by Baruch (1976), is considered a male-dominant category; that is, women have been expected to score at the lower end of the 1-to-5 range (with 1 representing not at all to 5 very). However, for the women in this study, only in three of the sixteen items were the mean scores for all subjects below 4. These items were: 1. feelings easily hurt/not easily hurt; 2. does not hide feelings at all/ usually hides feelings; and 3. dislikes math & science very much/likes very much (see Table 2, p.11).

On four other items the mean scores were above 4.5. These items were: 1. not at all independent to very independent; 2. not at all active & energetic to very active & energetic; 3. not at all competent & capable to very competent & capable; and 4. almost never acts as the leader to always acts as the leader (see Table 2, p.11).

The mean scores of the remaining nine items ranged from a low of 4.043 to a high of 4.462. These items were: 1. not at all competitive to very competitive; 2. not at all ambitious to very ambitious; 3. not at all adventurous/very adventurous; 4. not at all assertive to very assertive; 5. very dependent to not at all dependent; 6. not at all forceful to very forceful; 7. not at all logical to very logical; 8. not at all aggressive to very aggressive; and 9. very submissive to very dominant (see Table 2, p.11).

DISCUSSION

From the results of this study, it seems that family dynamics, the relationship between daughters and their mothers and fathers, continue to play an important role in the lives of women. The results of this study suggest, however, that contrary to Hennig's (1970) study of twenty-five women executives, that for these one-hundred-and-eighteen women, their mothers, equally, if not more so than their fathers, were influential in and supportive of their daughters' development of competence.

In their comments, many women expressed in very glowing terms, their thoughts about their relationships with both parents or either their mother or their father. One subject wrote that she had "a great childhood" grew up in "a totally supportive, loving family." Another said, "I always felt love and support at home." Additional comments came from other subjects, such as I had "super parents for a great start" and I had "the total confidence of both my parents." Numerous subjects mentioned the positive influence of parental support, and one specifically mentioned her parents' philosophy, "If you try hard and fail, it's OK--at least you did the best you could. You'll never look back and say I could have been or if I had only done."

Some women spoke only about the relationships they shared with their mothers. One subject, whose father left when she was only three, said that her mother believed in her and felt an appreciation for her accomplishments. Another wrote that her mother was her role model and was successful in her own way. She said that her mother "had a sense of humor, ran a hardware store when she was twenty-two and that was in the thirties. I felt it was natural to work and succeed." Another subject mentioned that her father had died when she was also three, and that her mother "functioned in a man's world" during the Depression. "I could do at least as well as she did." These women respected their mothers' ability to carry on under difficult circumstances, and as a result they served as models of competence for their daughters.

Josselson (1987) stated that "whatever helps the growing girl develop a sense of competence in her own abilities, independent of the praise of others, will be helpful ....." (p.188). However, it seems that for most women, the development of a sense of competence is shaped largely by the expectations, values, rewards and punishments given to them by the important people in their lives (Barnett & Baruch, 1978).

Many of the subjects in this study seemed to have families who were able to give them the support necessary to develop a strong sense of competence. More of the subjects, however, felt that their mothers were warmer and more nurturing than felt that their fathers were warm and supportive. They also felt that their mothers were more willing to spend time with them. Nevertheless, more subjects ranked early parental support, whether from one or both parents, over all other influences, as the major contributor to their sense of competence.

The women in this study scored in the high range (above four) on thirteen of the sixteen items of the Competence sub-scale, adapted by Baruch (1976), of the Sex-Role Inventory (Rosenkrantz, et al., 1968). These results suggest that perhaps the items concerning the development of competence are just as relevant and applicable to women as they are to men.

In this study a retrospective technique was employed: that is, the subjects were asked various questions that dealt with their past. They were asked to recall their feelings and perceptions about influences from early childhood to the present. It can be expected that the recollection of events from the past can be distorted. Also, as with any self-report measure, subjects' perceptions may be biased. At the present time, however, due to the scarcity of data on women who have actually pursued careers, use of the retrospective approach is still considered a valid way to obtain this type of data. Expectation studies that try to predict successful careers based on the characteristics of younger women have not proven to be very productive (Steinberg, 1984).

Research on the development of adult women is still relatively new. We are only just beginning to understand the relationship of the development of competence and work in the lives of women. Therefore, additional research in areas as discussed in the present study is certainly warranted.

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